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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study evaluating a graduate-level distance education program that provides special education teacher preparation at rural sites throughout Utah. The program was developed by the University of Utah to address problems associated with teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas. The program uses an "integrated" approach that combines interactive telecommunications technology, prerecorded videotaped courses, and on-site instruction and supervision. A survey examined participants' perceptions of program content and delivery as well as information about teacher retention over an 8-year period. Survey responses were received from 54 of 92 individuals who completed a master's degree in education or special education certification through the program between 1988 and 1996. The average age of respondents was 45 years; all but three were employed in the field of education, the majority being employed in special education; and all respondents had remained in rural settings since completion of the program. Respondents indicated that the most valuable program components were behavior management skills, information on legal issues in special education, and on-the-job-training. They also valued on-site support from university program staff and the opportunity to access the program in their local community. With regard to program delivery, respondents indicated a preference for live on-site instruction, with videotaped courses supported by an on-site facilitator as the next preferred delivery mode. Respondents felt that the most critical challenges confronting rural special education pertain to financial support for local special education programs and educating students with more severe and complex needs in rural school districts. (LP)

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DISTANCE LEARNERS TALK BACK: RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS EVALUATE THEIR TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

Introduction

The unique challenges of serving students with disabilities in rural settings have been reported in the special education literature for over a decade. Transportation issues, distances between schools, cultural differences, "boom and bust" cycles, inadequate housing, access to personnel development opportunities, and recruitment and retention of qualified staff are some of these challenges. One issue in particular, the critical need for qualified personnel, has direct impact on the delivery of services for rural students with disabilities and continues to be a serious problem for rural school administrators (Berkeley & Ludlow, 1991; Helge, 1981, 1984; Lemke, 1995; Ludlow, 1985; Marrs, 1984).

Access to specialized preparation and socialization into school and community life are two issues which impact the recruitment and retention of qualified personnel in rural schools. Individuals in rural communities who would like to become certified in special education often do not have access to university and college training programs because of long distances, topography, and weather conditions. The socialization of new teachers includes not only introducing them to the policies and procedures of the school, but to the culture of the entire community. Educators who are not fully socialized into a rural community are likely to leave. However, recent research suggests that individuals who are already part of a rural community and who receive their preparation in the community tend to remain (Lemke, 1995). Recognizing the importance of socialization to retention issues as well as the critical need for access to preparation programs, rural school districts in cooperation with university preparation programs have developed a variety of distance delivery approaches designed to recruit and prepare special educators (Berkeley & Ludlow, 1991; Ludlow & Wienke, 1992; Sebastian, 1995).

This paper presents the findings of a study designed to evaluate a distance teacher education program which was developed to address the recruitment and retention issues described above by providing special education teacher preparation at several rural sites throughout the state of Utah. Participants in the program were recruited directly from these rural districts and communities. The program was delivered via an "integrated" approach which combines interactive telecommunications technology, prerecorded videotaped courses, along with on-site instruction and supervision (Egan, Sebastian, Welch, & Page, 1991). The study

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examined participants' perceptions of program content and delivery as well as gathering basic information about teacher retention over an eight year period of time.

Method

Survey Instrument

A four-part survey was designed to evaluate the University of Utah's graduate-level distance education program in special education. Part I of the survey asked for demographic information and experience working in rural settings. Part II consisted of 22 Likert-type questions and two open-ended questions pertaining to the respondent's perception of the distance education teacher preparation program. The Likert-type questions utilized a six-point scale (6 = "strongly agree" to 1 = "strongly disagree"). Items in Part II focused on six main areas including: (a) assessment/evaluation, (b) curriculum and instruction, (c) behavior management and social skills, (d) collaboration and communication, (e) legal issues/professionalism, and (f) field experiences/student teaching. Part III of the survey asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of the different distance delivery approaches (e.g., live interactive television, videotaped classes, etc). Part IV of the survey consisted of an open-ended question asking respondents to identify the most critical challenges facing rural special education today. The survey instrument was piloted and underwent an expert review prior to mailing. The survey was mailed during the first week of May, 1996. Approximately two weeks later follow-up telephone calls were made to encourage subjects to complete and return the surveys.

Subjects and Data Analysis

Individuals who had completed the University of Utah's Master of Education and/or certification program in special education through distance education between 1988 to 1996 participated in the study. A total of 54 usable surveys were returned out of 92 that were mailed (59% response rate). Demographic information obtained from Part I was summarized and is presented below. Data analysis for Part II of the survey included calculating the mean and standard deviations for each of the six program areas (e.g., assessment/evaluation). Individual item means and standard deviations were also calculated and written comments were tabulated. Data analysis for Part III included calculation of the mean and standard deviation for each delivery approach. Responses to Part IV were reviewed, categorized and tabulated.

Results

Part I of the survey asked respondents to provide information about themselves and their current employment context (see Table 1). The average age for the educators responding to this survey was 45 years. All but three of the 54 respondents were currently employed in the field of education. Of those, most were in special education teaching positions. Other positions identified by respondents included general education teachers, administrators, and other specialists. All respondents had remained in rural settings since completion of the program.

Table 1.
Subject Profile

Gender:	Frequency	Percent
Female	47	87
Male	7	13

Age	Mean	Median	Mode	Range
	44.8	45	42 & 45	29-75

Professional Status

Currently employed in education? Yes = 51 No = 3

In what setting? Public = 48 Private = 1 No response = 2
Preschool = 2 Elem. = 21 Secondary = 17 Both = 3
Other = 12

In what capacity? Resource room = 19 Self-contained = 8 Both = 3
Administration = 9 Related service = 3 Gen. Ed. = 8
Consultant = 1

How long in this capacity? Mean = 7.32 years; range = 1 to 18 years

University special education programs in which you were enrolled?

Certification only = 9 Masters = 20 Certification w/Masters = 22

Area: Mild/moderate = 34 Severe = 10 Other = 8

Number of years worked in a rural district after completing university program?

Mean = 5.93 years; range = 1 to 17 years

Prior to completion did you work in special education under a letter of authorization?

Yes = 28 (Mean number of years = 2.82) No = 24

Part II of the survey assessed the six main areas of the program. On a scale of 1 to 6, the overall mean of all six areas was 5.05 (see Table 2). Individual program area means clustered around a mean of 5 or greater with the exception of the area of collaboration/communication skills (4.74). This particular area represents a recently added component to the teacher preparation program. When asked to identify program components that were the most valuable

the top three responses were: (a) behavior management skills, (b) information on legal issues in special education, and (c) on-the-job-training. In response to this question individuals also identified as valuable the on-site support from university program staff and the opportunity to access a preparation program in their local community. Respondents provided several suggestions for improving the program. Suggestions included providing more access and contact with campus faculty, more live interaction using the telecommunications technology, and increased technical quality of video tapes and course materials.

Table 2.
Evaluation of Program Components, Means and Standard Deviations

(6-point scale, 6= favorable response)

Component	Mean	Std. Dev.
Assessment and evaluation	5.04	.89
Curriculum and instruction	5.01	.86
Behavior management and social skills	5.14	.77
Collaboration and communication skills	4.74	.90
Legal issues and professionalism	5.34	.74
Field experiences and student teaching	5.22	1.02
Overall rating of the program	5.05	.89

Part III had the respondents identify the effectiveness (on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being very effective) of different delivery approaches used during their program (see Table 3). Respondents indicated a preference for live on-site instruction, with video tape courses supported by an on-site facilitator as their next preferred delivery mode. Respondents' least preferred delivery approach was video taped courses without the support of an on-site facilitator.

Table 3.
Evaluation of Distance Delivery Approaches

(4-point scale; 1= Not Effective, 4= Very Effective)

Delivery system	Mean	Std. Dev.
Interactive television	3.15	.83
On-site instruction	3.80	.45
Videotape with on-site facilitator	3.41	.64
Videotape without on-site facilitator	2.47	.93
Videotape with interactive television	3.04	.65

Finally, in Part IV respondents were asked to identify what they see as the "most critical challenges confronting rural special education today". Financial support for local special education programs was the most frequently mentioned concern. The next concern most frequently identified related to educating students with more severe and complex needs in rural school districts. Additional challenges mentioned were the "inclusion" of students with disabilities and lack of support services for the more severely involved students. Other responses reflected site specific issues related to the local educational environment.

Discussion

Providing teacher preparation programs in rural communities to individuals recruited from within those communities seems to address both the recruitment and retention problems identified in the literature. Based upon the respondents' ratings the special education program offered at a distance by the University of Utah appears to meet the preparation needs of these rural special educators. Respondents provided insight into the effectiveness of a variety of distance delivery approaches and areas for technical improvement. It was also clear from the respondents' comments that frequent and face-to-face contact with university faculty is important for program participant satisfaction. Several of the critical challenges confronting rural special education reported by respondents have not changed over the years (i.e., finance). It was interesting to note that an overwhelming majority of the responses to this question were specific to the local context.

Note: If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the survey instrument that was used in this study, please contact the authors.

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